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Della backs students in newspaper case

Southern High 'Bulldog' can be published from his office, state senator says

By Erika Niedowski
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A state senator has offered to allow journalism students at Baltimore's Southern High School -- who shut down their newspaper because of a dispute with the principal over its content -- to publish an "underground" version out of his office.

"If the matter regarding the newspaper is not resolved I would make resources available to you and your colleagues to publish an underground (sorry for the terminology) newspaper that would allow you to report in a truthful manner the conditions at Southern," Sen. George W. Della Jr. wrote to several students who contacted his office last month.

Principal Thomas Stephens objected to the February issue of The Bulldog -- which contained criticism of the school system's plan to turn Southern into a technology magnet school next fall -- and said that future issues couldn't be published unless he approved them.

The newspaper's March issue, whose cover showed a student holding a sign saying "I've Been Censored" and which contained articles describing chaos in the halls and other unsafe or unsanitary conditions at the school, was not sanctioned by the administration and was circulated unofficially.

"The conditions at Southern should not be swept under the carpet," Della wrote in the letter sent to students Friday. "There is absolutely nothing wrong with describing these conditions in" The Bulldog.

The South Baltimore Democrat said yesterday that the students could work out of his Light Street district office to put the newspaper together and then distribute copies off school grounds -- with his assistance.

"You would think that if kids wanted to participate at that level that the powers-that-be would be applauding them for being involved for caring enough to write the stories -- and not slanted stories, because they asked for opinions," Della said yesterday. "That's wonderful. That's what I would like to see kids do."

The school system said it is continuing to investigate the situation, including the policy on the rights of student journalists.

"It's being reviewed, and we hope to bring it to resolution very soon," said spokeswoman Edie House.

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